In a letter to all the former pastors, Paul Anderson invited each of us to reminisce about our time here. And even though Paul invited me to preach, I will take him up on his offer to remember and reminisce about our time here, Sue's and mine, from the fall of 1960 until September, 1966.

Now, I know there is nothing quite as tedious - and boring - than having to listen to an old guy talk about how it used to be in the good old days. But if the people of this congregation could endure the preaching and pontificating of a 22 year old who was breathtakingly innocent of any knowledge or experience of ministry - if they could do that - for six years - I am confident that you can endure a few minutes of this.

We came to Dyer - to the Dyer Union Church - in September of 1960. The church was already quite old, organized, I believe, in the 1880's, as a non-denominational community church, and it lived and thrived in its white frame building on Hart Street over the years. Ministers, in those years before we arrived, were mostly students at The Chicago Theological Seminary or the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. They would drive out from the city on Sunday morning, or Saturday - and stay overnight with one of the church members, preach on Sunday morning, make a few visits, and then return to the city.

And then, becaus of some financial shenanigans by the church treasurer, - who I believe left town with the church's money - the church ended up in

possession of his house on Harrison Avenue. The student minister then became a resident, commuting several days a week back to school in Chicago.

I hate to confess it, but confession is good for the soul I am told, so here goes. The appeal the Dyer Union Church had for me, initially, I confess was that little house. We were living in married student housing and in order to stay afloat financially I was working two jobs, rehabbing old houses during the day, coming home for a bite to eat and then heading off to work each evening as a janitor in on of the University of Chicago office buildings. We had a nine month old baby, Diane, who Sue was caring for pretty much on her own. And I was carrying a full academic load. It was challenging, to say the least. And so, when, one day, I saw a notice on the

Seminary bulletin board.. Wanted ..Student Pastor. Dyer Union Church..$50 per week and free use of the parsonage.. the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit spoke to me in that instant and without the foggiest noton of how to be a minister, I called the number on the notice to say I was interested in the job. It was Alan Roebuck's number. Alan and Mae Roebuck were stalwart members and Alan was in charge of finding a new minister. Alan was a Ph.D. Chemist for Amoco.

So we drove out to Dyer in our 57 Ford and I met with Alan and the committee, and lo and behold, for no rational reason, I found myself invited to come be a student minister for a year or two.

We scraped together a few items of used furniture,

spent most of our money at Sears for two chairs, an end table - Danish Modern, of course, and a kitchen table and chairs, rented a U Haul and moved to Dyer. And it is no exaggeration at all to say that, beginning with an absolutely blank slate, I learned how to a minister over the next six years, and the people of this church were my teachers.. They are mostly gone now, maybe all of them..Alan and Mae Roebuck..Mike and Edna Paddock..Edna was he church treasurer and she and Mike used to deliver my weekly $50 check and always brought - eggs from their chicken coop, Honeydew Melons, tomatoes cabbages from Mike's huge garden. They had no children of their own and on special occasions Mike bought little dresses for our little girls ..Diane, and Susan who was born that first summer. Del and Carrie Burton, the Sparks and

Uhter families, Bill and Dorothy Parsons, Peg and Joe Miklik, Velma Gilliam - the SS Superintendent and Orville, tehe Grubers, the Granbacks, , Alma Vandervort and , Kathleen Eberle, Dorothy Goettler.

We were particularly blessed to have as next door neighbors on Harrison Avenue, who became dear friends and our Dyer family, Nate and Art Pennington. They simply adopted us (and we needed adopting!); took us under their wings, loved our children and gave generously of their time and their love. Art could build or fix anything - that's the kind of neighbor to have. the notoriously unreliable furnac, the water pump, my 57 Ford that would not start on cold mornings. They weren't members of the church at first, but somehow Art persudaded

men he knew in the church that the minister needeed a garage. Art and I built it or more accuratly, Art built it and I helped as best as I could. and learned a lot.

In time they began to attend the church and eventually joined ...I don't think I ever asked them to.. and Art became was on the first Session of the new PresbyterianChruch and deeply involved in the plannigng and construction of the new building.

We are celebrating 50 years of affiliation with the Presbyterian Church. For many years, decades in fact, there were two churches in Dyer: the Roman Catholic Church and Dyer Union Church. If you were a Protestant and wanted to go to church on

Sunday morning, we were the only show in town. By 1960, however, there was a thriving and growing methodist Church, a Southern Baptist Church, a Lutheran Church and suddenly the rationale for being a non affiliated, non denominational church didn't seem quite as important and maybe even a hindrance to future growth. (ironic and interesting that in what is sometimes called the post-denominational age, some churches are deleting denominational references to their names and calling themselves Community Churches.) So, we did what churches are best at and formed a committee to study the matter and the committee recommended that the congregation affiliate with a Mainline Protestant denomination. The committee looked at the United Methodist Church but there was already a Methodist Church in Dyer: The United

Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church seemed most appropriate and so the committee recommended that we take a deeper look at those two.

A UCC Minister from Gary came out and met with us and explained what he UCC believed and how it worked. A Presbyterian Executive, the Rev James Sala from West Lafayette, came up and explained what Presbyterianism was all about' Frankly, I thought the congregation would choose he UCC, but, to my surprise the vote was to become a Presbyterian congregation, and on April 15,1952, we were welcomed in the Presbytery of Logansport and the Presbyterian Church(USA), which brought with it the designation as a New Church Development project of the national church's Board of National

Missions., and the commitment of future financial support.

The congregation began to grow and when I approached graduation and ordination decided that I should be invited to remain and become the first full-time called pastor. Because we were a new Church Development project of the denomination, financial help to pay the salary and expenses involved in having a resident pastor were provided by the denomination. Jim Sala was very instrumental in arranging and facilitating all this. So, after I graduated fro the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and Chicago Theological Seminary I returned to Altoona , Pennsylvania to be ordained and a month or so after was installed as the Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Dyer.

More new people arrived and assumed new responsibility and leadership: Gene and Barbara Forsythe, Barbara was my first Secretary, part-time and at first, unpaid: Lou and Vena Perrings, Bob and Marge Granback, Len and Carol Olson, Jim and Sharon Thomas, the Peeks, the Cassons, the Cheneys, John and Ginny Tennant , Glen and Charlotte Eberly- with their children and suddenly we had a crowded to overflowing Sunday School.

We tried to resolve the problem by creating classrooms in the church basement by builind plywood partitions that were supposed to be removable but were it was a huge undertaking to do it. We rented three rooms behind Kathleen Eberly's Beauty Shop on Main Street for an office and

classrooms for young children. Finally it was apparent that we needed new space. The Presbyterian Church agreed, got behind us financially and committed grants and loans to purchase property, hire an architect and built was all very exciting, and somehow we raised enough money to begin and we built this building which was completed and dedicated in 1966.

There were so many memorable and important moments along the way which I remember fondly, gratefully and a deepening sense of awe at the suspicion that God was part of this whole thing from the very beginning: Potluck suppers in te old church basement and because I was the minister I was always invited to be first in line and therefore always arrived first at the fried chicken which

always quickly disappeared. My children refined this to an art form. I remember, as I was praying over the food, seeing them our if the corner of my eye, slowly moving to the head of the eye, so that when all eyes opened after the prayer- there they were!

The Men's Spaghetti Supper - a major undertaking, presided over by Mike Paddock, stirring pots of pasta and his own sauce in the church basement, and so many people that one group ate while the next seating waited in the pews upstairs while Dorothy Goettler plated the organ. It was, also, by the way, a huge success financially and great fun alonf the way.

I remember Dart Ball games, home and away and my first Baptism Weddings

And funerals…Johnny Johnson died in November of my first year: I sat by his bedside overnight in the hospital, then drove Pearl home and planned a funeral - I not even been to a funerlal since I was seven years old. I learned and matured a lot that week.

And the excitement of the new building, the purchase of the property in what was an empty field, groundbreaking and the slow, steady process of construction. I visited the site every day and think I know every square inch of this building inside and out. We did as much of the work as we could to save money. I remember a long night which extended way beyond mid night laying tile with Gene Forsythe and Gerald Peek, up on the roof on a blistering hot

afternoon nailing shingles, and planting the final shrubs with Len Olson on the day before the building was dedicated.

But my best and most precious memory of all was what happened next, immediately after the building opened for business..And now I will begin a brief sermon.

For a few years several members of the congregation, including Sue and I were involved in an initiative called The Lake County Migrant Ministry. Migrant workers came to Lake County annually to work in the fields. They lived in migrant camps that left a lot to be desired in terms of basic facilities, and sanitation. Migrant children suffered. There were no child care facilities in the camps so

the children either accompanied their parents in the fields, or were left alone to play or , in some cases, to spend the entire long day in their parent's car.

One of the unfortunate by-products of the Migrant life was that the children were moved around so much that there was virtually no possibility to put together a coherent elementary education. Children would have to be enrolled for a few weeks in every new location. As a consequence many Migrant parent simply gave up The Migrant Ministry organized a summer remedial school, with credentialed teacher, arranged transportation to and from the camps by volunteer drivers each morning and afternoon, provided breakfast and lunch and recreation. The school was help in a Highland elementary school building. Members of

our congregation drove and helped as classroom aids.

I was on the Board of the Migrant Ministry and someone came up with the idea that we should also offer Daily VacationBible School after the school term was over and before the Migrants moved on. The brand new Presbyterian Church building in Dyer was the perfect location.

What happened next was the church at its best. We talked about it. It was , I recall, a very arduous discussion. There were those who were concerned about the new building - it might get damaged and it would certainly get used and probably dirty.

There were a few who were concerned about the

issue of race. Migrants were Hispanic mostly. A few were black. It was the 60's after all. A Dyer police officer explained to me that he personally handled the race issue by encouraging people of color to move on and not be around town after dark. Some of our leaders were worried about what the neighbors might think if we were seen transporting and welcoming "them" to Dyer.

When it came time to make a decision, it was nearly unanimous. The new Session decided to welcome the Migrant children. We provided the space, teachers, food, and one hopes, something even more important - the sense that these little ones, whose lives, generally, were very difficult, were precious,..precious in the sight of God, and therefore worthy of our concern and help and love.

It is what Christian faith maintain, proclaims and works for in the world. Every individual woman and man and child is the object of an eternal and infinite love from which nothing can ever separate us and which blesses every individual with dignity and value and worth.. And when my congregation put that theology to work by opening the doors of its shinny new building to the children, a little bit of the promised Kingdom of God appeared in our midst, and I have to say, I was very proud.

You know, sometimes we wonder about the church: whether it amounts to much finally; whether it is worth all the fuss in the long run,: all the time and energy and hope and love people invest in it: all the money they give to it. There are many voices today,

particularly when it comes to out part of the Holy Catholic Church, the part called Mainline or Mainstream American Protestantism - some, in fact, are calling us Old Line or Side Lined - there are many voices today that are announcing the end of the church, particularly our kind of church. Our numbers are down to be sure. We Presbyterians have lost half of our membership in the last 40 years, And of course, there is the matter that most of what people hear about us in the media is not all the goodness and kindness and justice that we continue to pour into the life of the world - a small Indiana congregation opening its doors, and its heart, to minority children, poor children, for instance - No, what the world knows about us are our scandals, our bickering, our all-out fights over almost every issue, but particularly sex.

Meanwhile our own culture seems to be becoming more and more secular right in front of our eyes. The fastest growing religious group in the United States to day is not the Roman Catholics or the Evangelicals or the Mega churches. No, the fastest growing religious group in the Unites States is what are called the "Nones" - the people who answer survey questions about religious preference with a one word - "None".

I've been doing this for 52 years, since that first Sunday in September of 1960 when I began as the student minister of this church, and then as a newly ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church(USA). In those years I have served four different congregations, each of them

unique: and I have had the opportunity to see a lot of "Church" in this nation and throughout the world. And out of all that I have come to a conclusion: The church is not only important, but also essential to the life of the world. And, finally, that while parts of the church may experience ups and downs, thriving in one century and nearly dying in the next;; individual congregations also have ups and downs, thriving in one period and struggling in the next: that certain forms of the church serve faithfully and then are replaced with new forms of the church. Through it all I conclude that Jesus was right when he said not even the gates of hell will prevail - because it is his church, God's Church. It is part of God's great economy. Someone has to say it and remind the world that people matter - because the world has a terrible record on that score. Someone

has to remember and remind the world and hold on for dear life to that absolutely essential idea that individual people matter: that each individual is created in the very Image of God and is the object of God's unconditional love, and therefore worthy of respect and care and love.

Someone has to remember particularly the most vulnerable, the marginalized, the victims of prejudice and bigotry and persecution. Someone has to remember and welcome and care for the children.

It is our job..My job, as long as I have breath.. and your job.

I am so grateful to have been part of that great purpose - here.

I am grateful for all that has transpired in the years between.

And I am grateful for the promise of God that God will continue to use the church for the great purpose of announcing and living out in its own life the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ, the Good News of God's love for all the children, for all of us, a love from which nothing will ever separate us.

Thanks be to God.